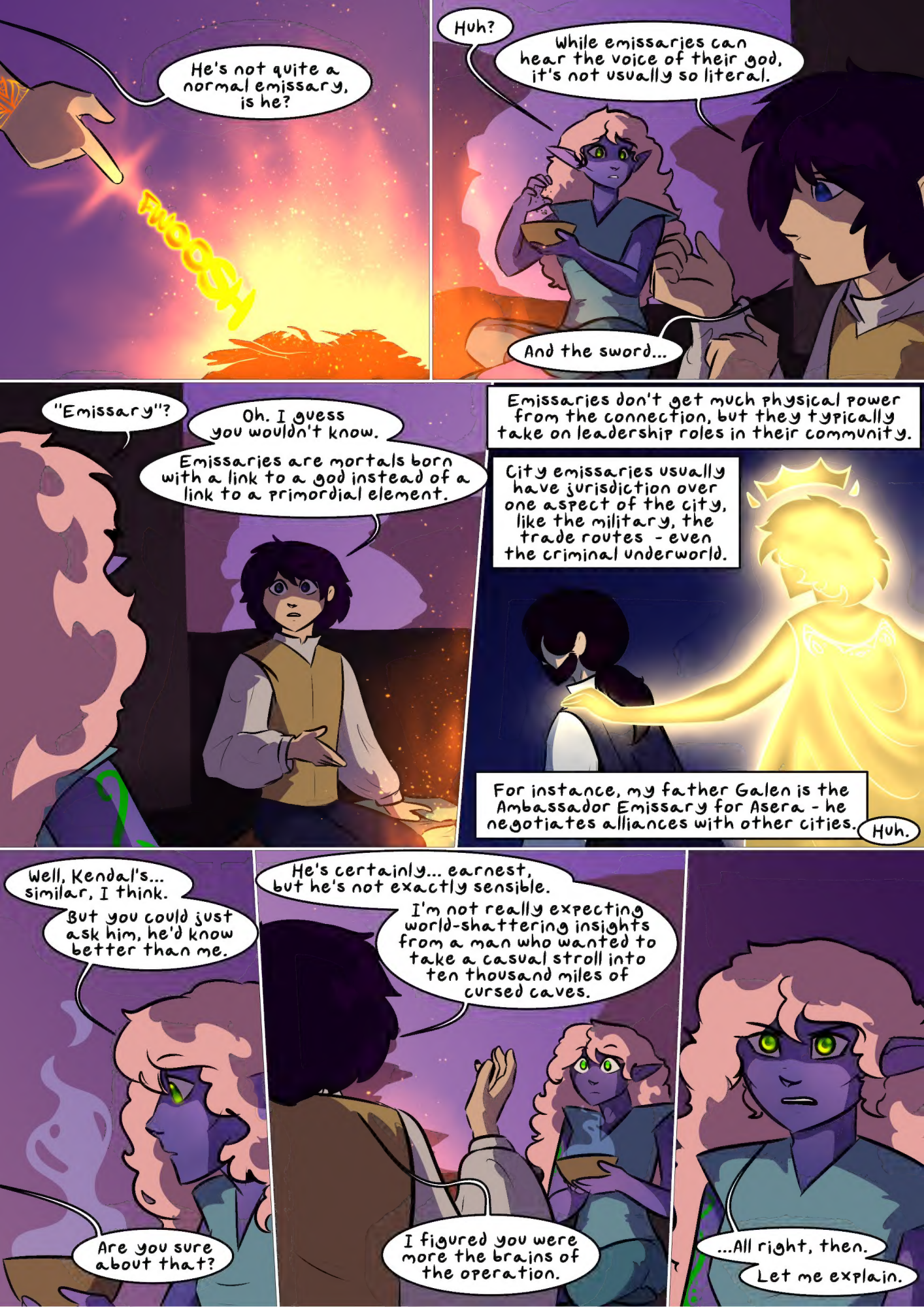
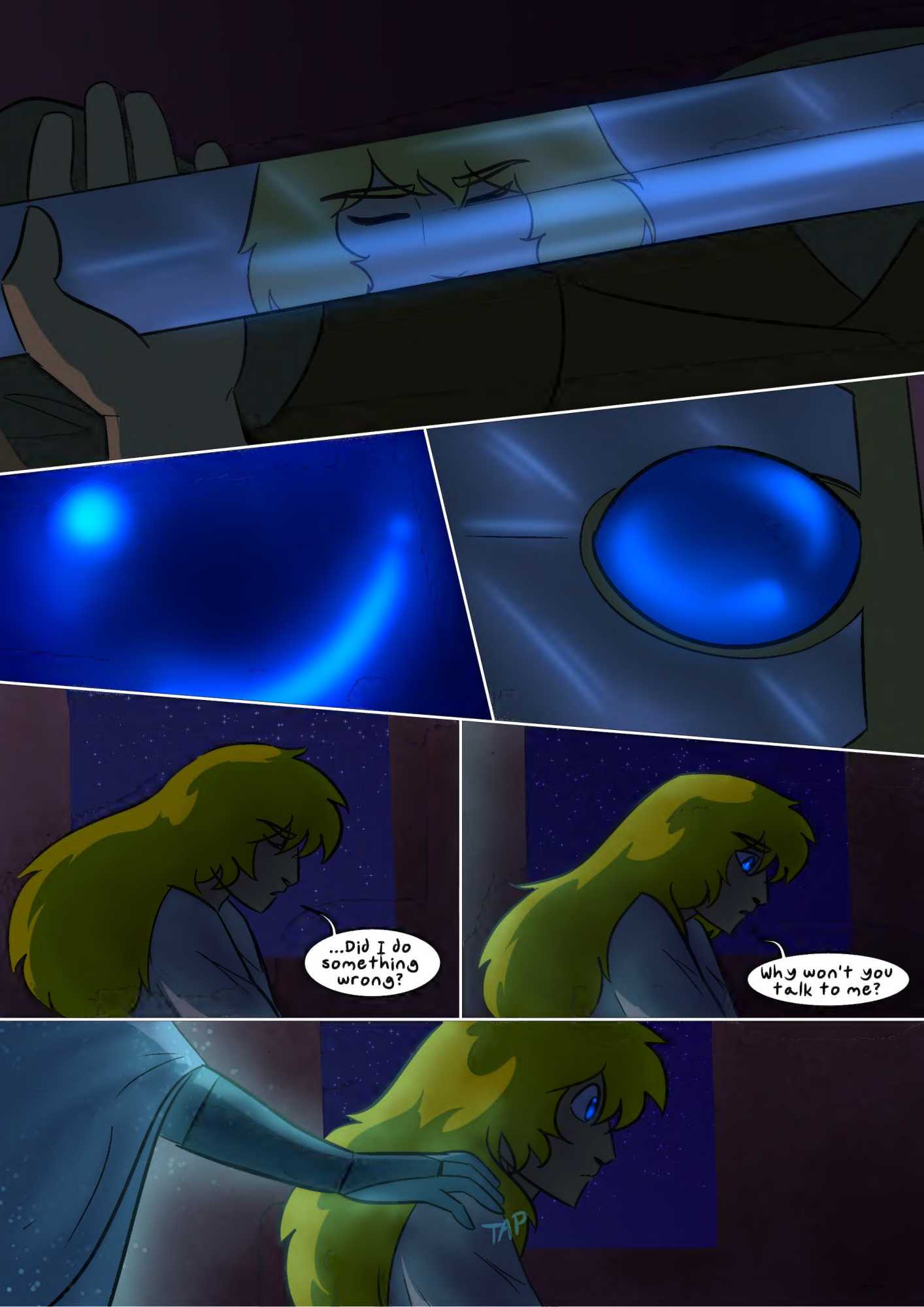
Chapter 7
Nightmare

Anything?
This place is so creepy.
Nothing's going to come out and attack us, right?
Probably not.
Well, nothing we can't handle, anyway.
Cave-crawlers are typically very averse to light and heat.
Ohhhhh good.
Kendal. Do you hear anything?
FWOOSH
Yes.

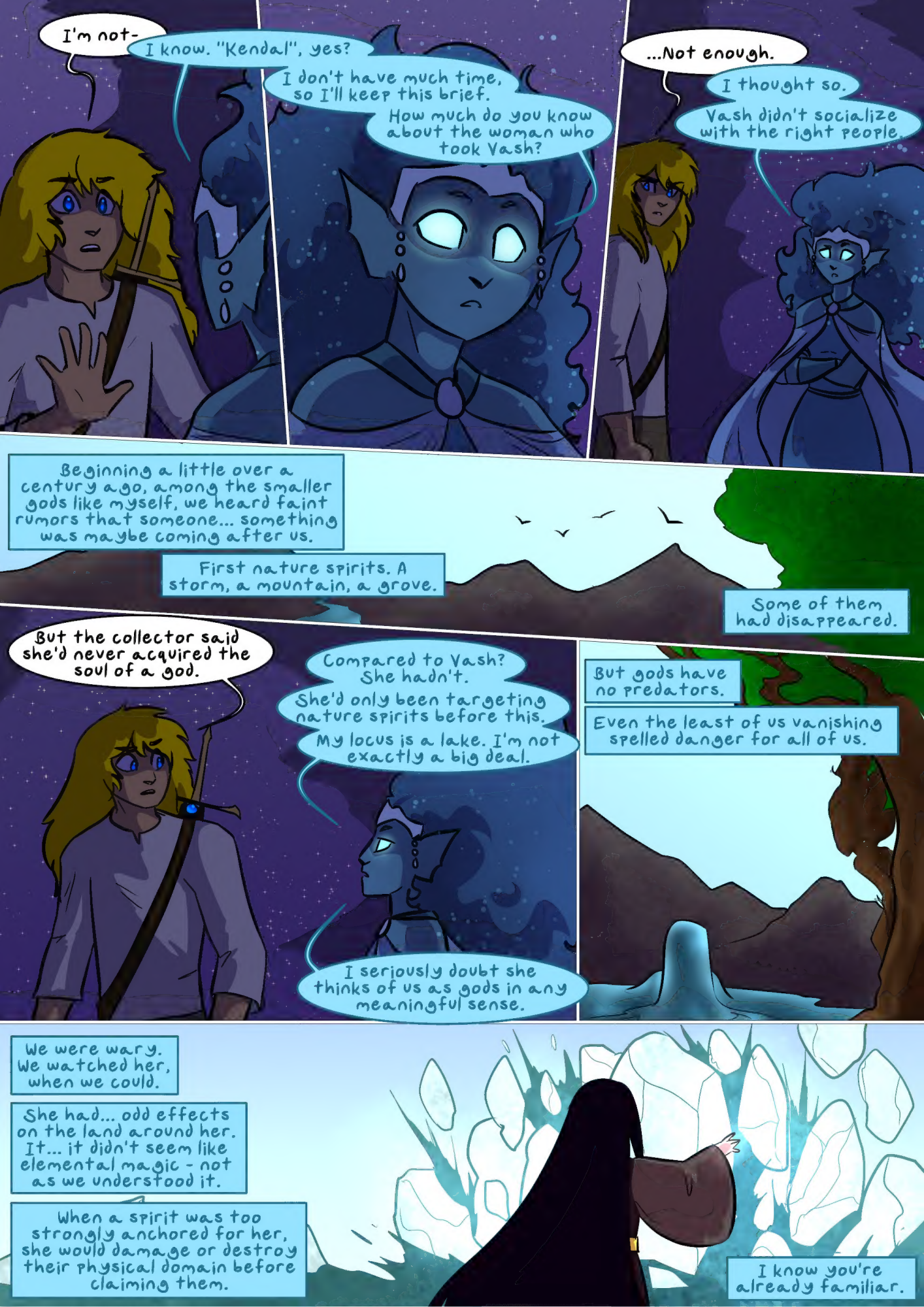
But it's faint, and muddled.
And kind of hard to hear when you guys are talking.
Oh. Sorry.
FWIP
Do you think you can pinpoint where he is?
I'm not sure.
He's very far down.
And he's not... talking much.
I might be able to get a better approximation, but it could take a few hours.
...All right then.
I'll set up camp.
GRRUMBLE...


He's not quite a normal emissary, is he?
FWOOSH
Huh?
While emissaries can hear the voice of their god, it's not usually so literal.
And the sword...
"Emissary"?
Oh. I guess you wouldn't know.
Emissaries are mortals born with a link to a god instead of a link to a primordial element.
Emissaries don't get much physical power from the connection, but they typically take on leadership roles in their community.
City emissaries usually have jurisdiction over one aspect of the city, like the military, the trade routes - even the criminal underworld.
For instance, my father Galen is the Ambassador Emissary for Asera - he negotiates alliances with other cities.
Huh.
Well, Kendal's... similar, I think.
But you could just ask him, he'd know better than me.
Are you sure about that?
He's certainly... earnest, but he's not exactly sensible.
I'm not really expecting world-shattering insights from a man who wanted to take a casual stroll into ten thousand miles of cursed caves.
I figured you were more the brains of the operation.
...All right, then.
Let me explain.

Kendal is... sheltered.
He's inexperienced, and still figuring himself out, and he definitely puts himself in too much danger.
I'll freely admit he's reckless.
TAP.
That recklessness is the ONLY reason you're HERE.
I told him to leave you in the wastes.
Kendal isn't stupid, and you owe him a LOT.
If you want to understand him, TALK to him.
...All right.
I'll bring it up in the morning.
Good plan.


...Did I do something wrong?
Why won't you talk to me?
TAP

Let's talk outside.
You're a long way from home. I assume it's important.
Ha. You do almost sound like him.
Vash was less formal, though.
I take it you remember me.
Lady Ilia, goddess of the Ilia lake and river valley.


I'm not-
I know. "Kendal", yes?
I don't have much time, so I'll keep this brief.
How much do you know about the woman who took Vash?
...Not enough.
I thought so.
Vash didn't socialize with the right people.
Beginning a little over a century ago, among the smaller gods like myself, we heard faint rumors that someone... something was maybe coming after us.
First nature spirits. A storm, a mountain, a grove.
Some of them had disappeared.
But the collector said she'd never acquired the soul of a god.
Compared to Vash? She hadn't.
She'd only been targeting nature spirits before this.
My locus is a lake. I'm not exactly a big deal.
I seriously doubt she thinks of us as gods in any meaningful sense.
But gods have no predators.
Even the least of us vanishing spelled danger for all of us.
We were wary. We watched her, when we could.
She had... odd effects on the land around her. It... it didn't seem like elemental magic - not as we understood it.
When a spirit was too strongly anchored for her, she would damage or destroy their physical domain before claiming them.
I know you're already familiar.

Why is she doing this?
We were never sure.
If she's looking for power, she's got more than enough already. She can warp the elements on a scale we've never seen.
Mortals sometimes look to the gods for youth or immortality, but she hasn't visibly aged in nearly a hundred years.
She's been collecting souls for study, but we don't know what she's hoping to learn.
And what she's doing to them in the meantime...
One came back, once.
A mountain god, years after he'd first vanished.
But he was completely incoherent.
His incarnations fell apart, he couldn't carry a conversation-
We heard she was taking souls apart.
We think she tried to put him back together.
Before, it was just smaller spirits, but now...
News of Vash's fate is spreading. The gods who disregarded our warnings are afraid.
The ones that felt safe now understand the true depths of her power.
And they're learning about you.

Me?
Of course. You're unprecedented, you know.
Whatever you are, you're trying to stop their only threat.
And frankly, you're rather more mobile than most of us.
For all our strengths, gods are limited in scope.
We can't freely move around in places we don't hold real power.
Just manifesting this far from my valley is stretching my essence too thin to sustain.
And no god would risk their mortal emissaries on this.
But with Vash taken, even the great gods are alarmed.
Jiya the Crimson has incarnated near the Sapphire Empire, and I hear the Nightmare Queen has been restless.
SPLISH
I don't know what they're all thinking, but I do know this.
With even a fraction of Vash's power and none of his limitations, you might be the only one capable of stopping her.
And we ALL want her stopped.
PLSH
If you ever need help, seek out the gods.
I can't promise they'll all help you, but I know they want you to win.
I'm sorry I can't do more. Vash was a good friend.
No, Ilia, this...
This is more helpful than you know.
I was asking Vash for guidance he's in no position to give.
But now I know I can look beyond him!

Oof.
...I need to return to my valley. This form is stretching my essence too far to sustain.
Of course.
Good luck, Kendal.
You don't have to do this alone.
I know.
Thank you.
CRACK-BOOM
AAAAAIEE
What was THAT?

WHOOSH
Headlong into danger. Vash should be proud.
CRACKLE

Alinua!
Erin?

No.
KSSSSSS
Ah!!
Alinva!
Please! Can you hear me?
GLEAM
It's him.
It's him.
It's Erin!
It took him into the caves!
AWAP

What?
Wait, are you all right-?
The - the thing! The thing with golden eyes!
He got up, and-
Erin?
What's up?
What-?
It can wait. This one has a more pressing engagement.
...Interesting.
So you really DON'T understand.
Hey! STOP!
Erin! Or... WHATEVER you are!
THWIP
Oh, you wound me.
But this chance is too perfect to waste.
And I will allow no further delays.

Erin attacked you?!
I don't think Erin was even awake.
It was that... that thing.
It was still acting like it knew me--
And it took him!
Ugh, stupid! Why did he think it would leave him alone?!
What should we do?
Well - we have to go after him!
Uh. Right?
No, of course I agree, I just...
Kind of wasn't expecting you to suggest it.
Look... when we found him, he was a... a giant explosion of evil disintegration magic.
Staying away from THAT was just common sense!
But we said we'd help him-
And a promise like that is more important than common sense!
Besides, if I said no, you'd obviously go anyway.
Of course.
Is that NOT common sense?
Not really.
Oh.
Then I might not know what that means.

FWOOSH
So... What did Erin say we needed for a safe expedition into the Caves?
Map. Food. Supplies.
Magical shielding.
Small army.
And what have we got?
This torch.
...He can yell at us later.

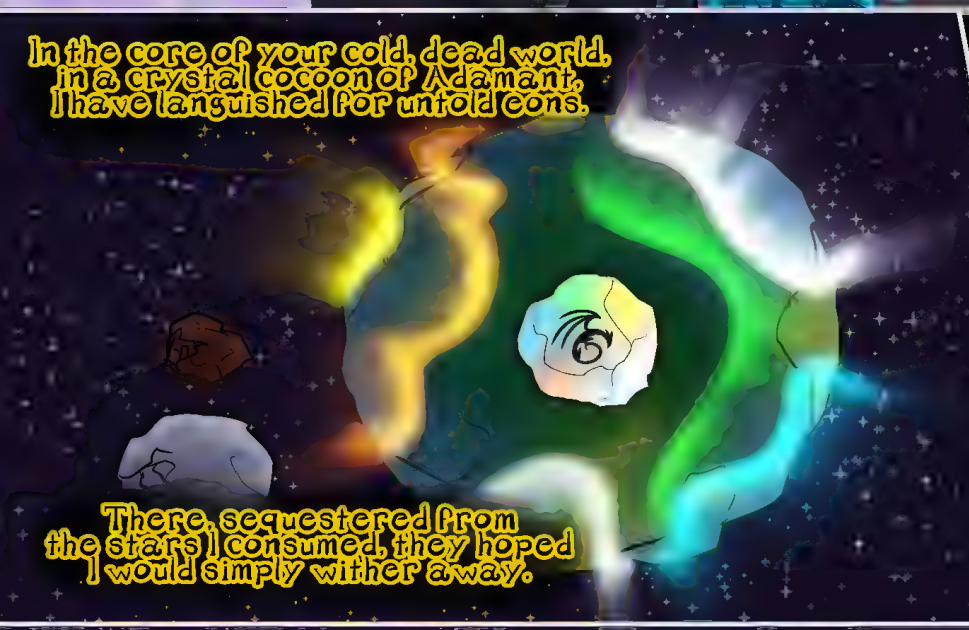
Strange.
I feel...
...strange.
Are my eyes closed, or is it just dark?
It's almost like I'
Do stop screaming.
I'm right here.

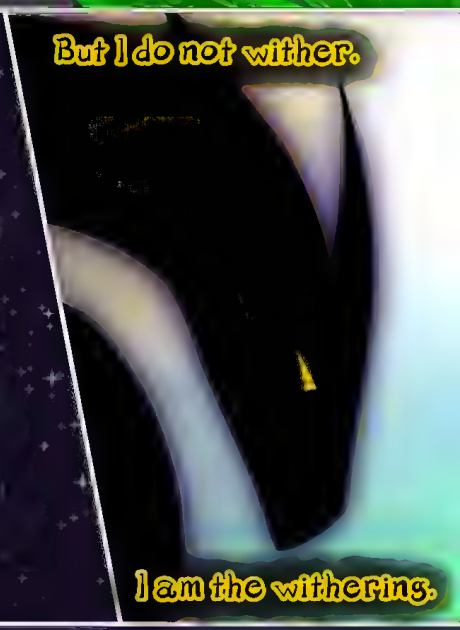
There's no need to be afraid. I will allow no harm to come to you.
Wh - what's happening? Where am I?!
Don't play dumb. I'm in your mind.
...The caves?
Very good.
And I'm impressed that you've already guessed what I am.
The worst-case scenario.
I'm flattered.
This is crazy.
You're a creation myth.
But the symbol... the black dragon...
And a power that could rip through any substance, regardless of element...
Yes. Your logical journey was amusing to watch.
Too intelligent to deny the truth, too terrified to truly accept it.
Everyone knows the six Primordials are dead.
But we only have myths about what killed them.
A shame. It was some of my finest work.
We call you the Void Dragon.
Uncreative, but acceptable.
...Interesting to meet you.
Please. No formalities between us.
We're already so close.

My, my, how that mind of yours is racing.
Formulating an escape plan already?
Can you BLAME me?
No - but you're wasting your time.
We're already some distance underground, and you were quite unconscious for most of the way.
Would you exhaust yourself, searching fruitlessly for the exit until the beasts consumed you?
Maybe the others...
Ah, yes. Relying on one's friends.
An unreliable strategy even in the best conditions.
And these "friends"? Two strangers you met less than a day ago.
Two strangers you tried to kill.
YOU tried to kill them!
Does it matter?
Will it matter if they find you?
I am far stronger here, and I know you wouldn't want to see them dead by your hands.
Perhaps it would be better to hope that they elected to leave you down here.
So there's no way out.
Ha!
A matter of perspective.

So...
You're more than just a fairy tale.
And, more surprisingly, still alive.
Heh.
But why are you in my head?
KZZT
Would you like to guess?
Just TELL me!
Heh. There's no point in fear NOW.
I'm not in the mood for games.
An explanation is the LEAST you could do.
Oh. very well.
You already know me by reputation.
Of course.
You're a creation myth. A way to explain why the six primordials died making our world.
They sacrificed themselves to stop you from eating the sun -
- and either killed you outright or sealed you away forever.
And what would a mortal know of "forever"?
Yes, our battle was more than myth. And my defeat was, unfortunately, all too real.
I was confident in my victory. All but Stone were wounded and far too weak to rally.
I failed to recognize Stone's intentions as he made his final charge against me.
Even as I consumed his first heart, he called upon the greatest weapon the Six possessed.

In a final act of power, Stone and his dying compatriots combined their forms to seal me in a prison I could never destroy.
His heart, transmuted and transformed, became my prison and my tomb.
Adamant – the only substance that I can neither consume nor destroy. The greatest weapon the Six wielded in our battle.
The perfect fusion of six imperfect primordial beings.
Insufficient to destroy me, but more than capable of imprisoning me.
And then they died.

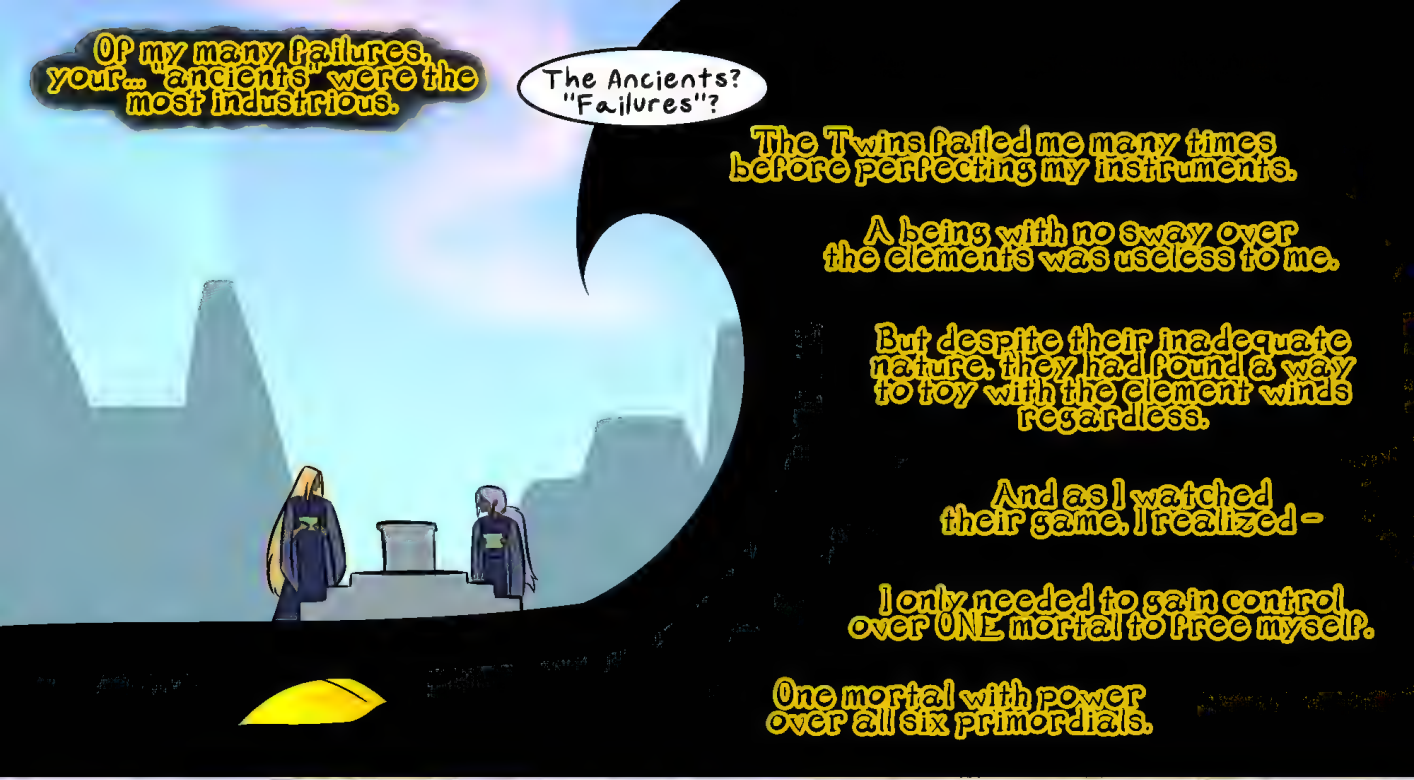

In the core of your cold, dead world, in a crystal cocoon of Adamant, I have languished for untold eons.
There, sequestered from the stars I consumed, they hoped I would simply wither away.


But I do not wither.
I am the withering.

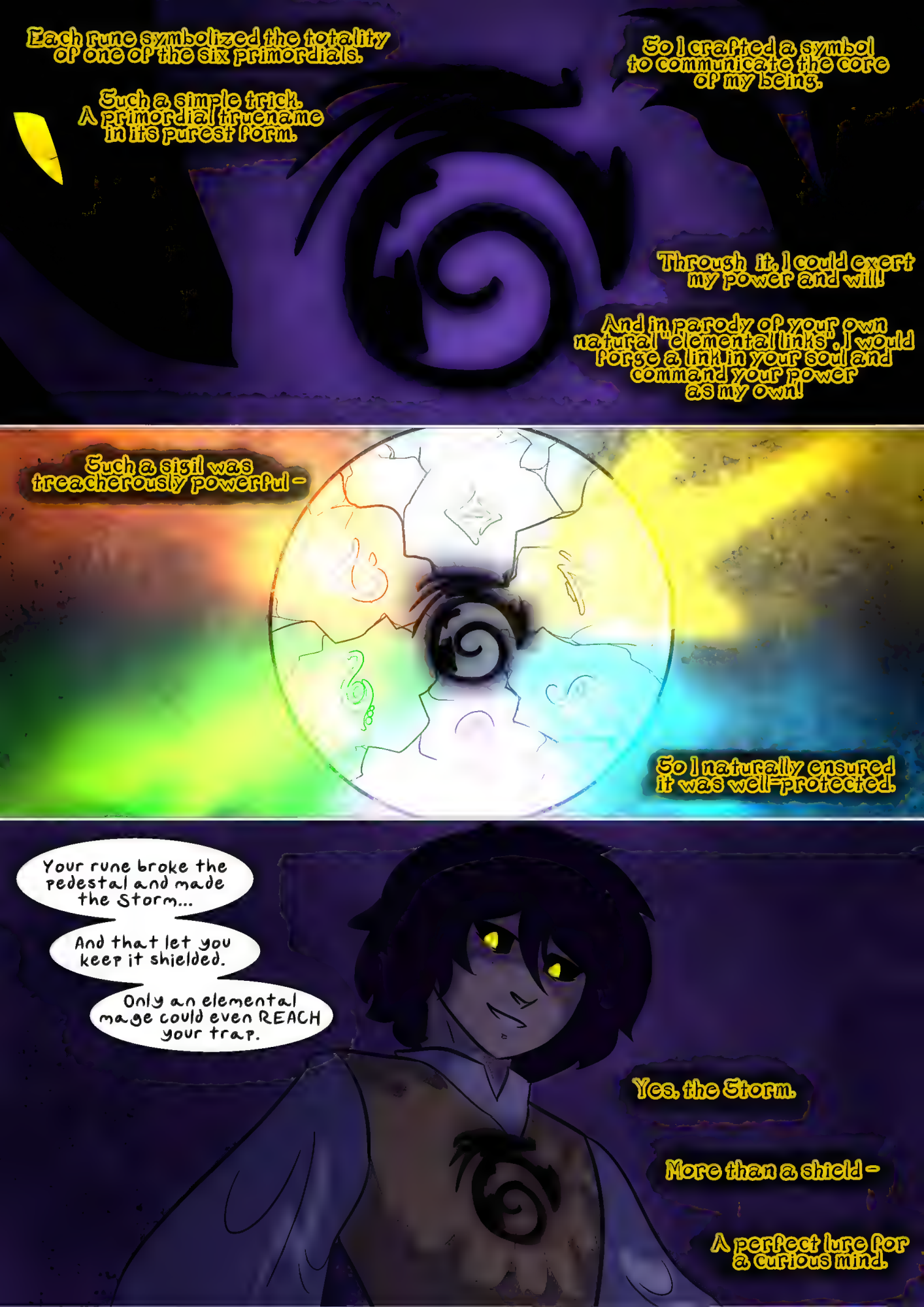
And now, at LAST, escape is within my reach!
So, you want out.
I assume that's what you need me for?

Clever creature.
But you are merely the final capstone of a plan millennia in the making.
With the primordials dead, their souls freed and formless, no power could impel their forms to unfuse and free me.
Adamant can never be destroyed, only unmade. And only the Primordials could will their forms to separate.
By killing them, I had turned the key on my own imprisonment.
Clever.
But not clever enough to thwart me forever.
I had nothing but time to think of a way to revive the very beings I'd poured so much effort into killing.
I concluded I needed to find a way to redirect fragments of their mindless essence back into their bodies, and compel them to obey.
Interesting.
That's the same core mechanism behind our elemental magic.
HAHAHAHAHAHA
Petty, self-important creature!
Who do you think GAVE you "elemental magic"?!

What?!
Your species is tool-using. You understand that one must create the means to do what one cannot do by one's inborn nature.
I cannot command the primordials, but I could command your twin gods.
Woven from the remains of the primordials themselves, your very bodies called out to the element winds to be controlled!
Within you, I forged the key to my escape!
You... no.
You MADE humans?
We're just a way to FREE you?!
Settle down.
Hnn!
It was certainly my plan.
Regrettably, my Other had other ideas.
Your... what?
The moment my tool was perfected, they awoke the mortals' wills.
Mortals given sentience could not be controlled, and in a single instant, my hope of escape scattered with your fledgling species.
For many centuries, I languished in dormancy and despair.
And then, something changed.


Of my many failures, your... "ancients" were the most industrious.
The Ancients? "Failures"?
The Twins failed me many times before perfecting my instruments.
A being with no sway over the elements was useless to me.
But despite their inadequate nature, they had found a way to toy with the element winds regardless.
And as I watched their game, I realized -
I only needed to gain control over ONE mortal to free myself.
One mortal with power over all six primordials.

Because fused materials can only be created or destroyed by a mage with power over every component element.
To unmake your adamant prison, you needed an Elemental Magus.
FOOOM
Such a lofty title.
But your grand purpose befits it, I suppose.
But even if I found this perfect mortal, I had no way to command them.
With sentience and free will, I could not simply reach into their minds as freely as I wished -
But the Ancient's little rune game gave me an idea.


Each rune symbolized the totality of one of the six primordials.
Such a simple trick. A primordial truename in its purest form.
So I crafted a symbol to communicate the core of my being.
Through it, I could exert my power and will!
And in parody of your own natural "elemental links", I would forge a link in your soul and command your power as my own!
Such a sigil was treacherously powerful -
So I naturally ensured it was well-protected.
Your rune broke the pedestal and made the Storm...
And that let you keep it shielded.
Only an elemental mage could even REACH your trap.
Yes, the Storm.
More than a shield -
A perfect lure for a curious mind.

Well, you certainly know how to sour a victory.
Being your puppet is taking all the fun out of being the elemental magus.
Oh, stop. Can't you just enjoy your part in this?
Every mortal dreams of changing the world.
Without your talent, your drive and curiosity, I could have languished for centuries more!
And your fortuitous approach to the caves let me channel MUCH more power through you. Not even Life's vessel can stop us here, where my influence grows only stronger!
Life's...?
And finally - FINALLY, all the pieces are in place!
You are my perfect creation! The instrument of my will, with abilities even I never commanded alone!
Your phenomenal power is the key to releasing me from this prison you call a world!
Wow.
Sounds like you've really got this all figured out.
Yes, I thought you'd appreciate it.

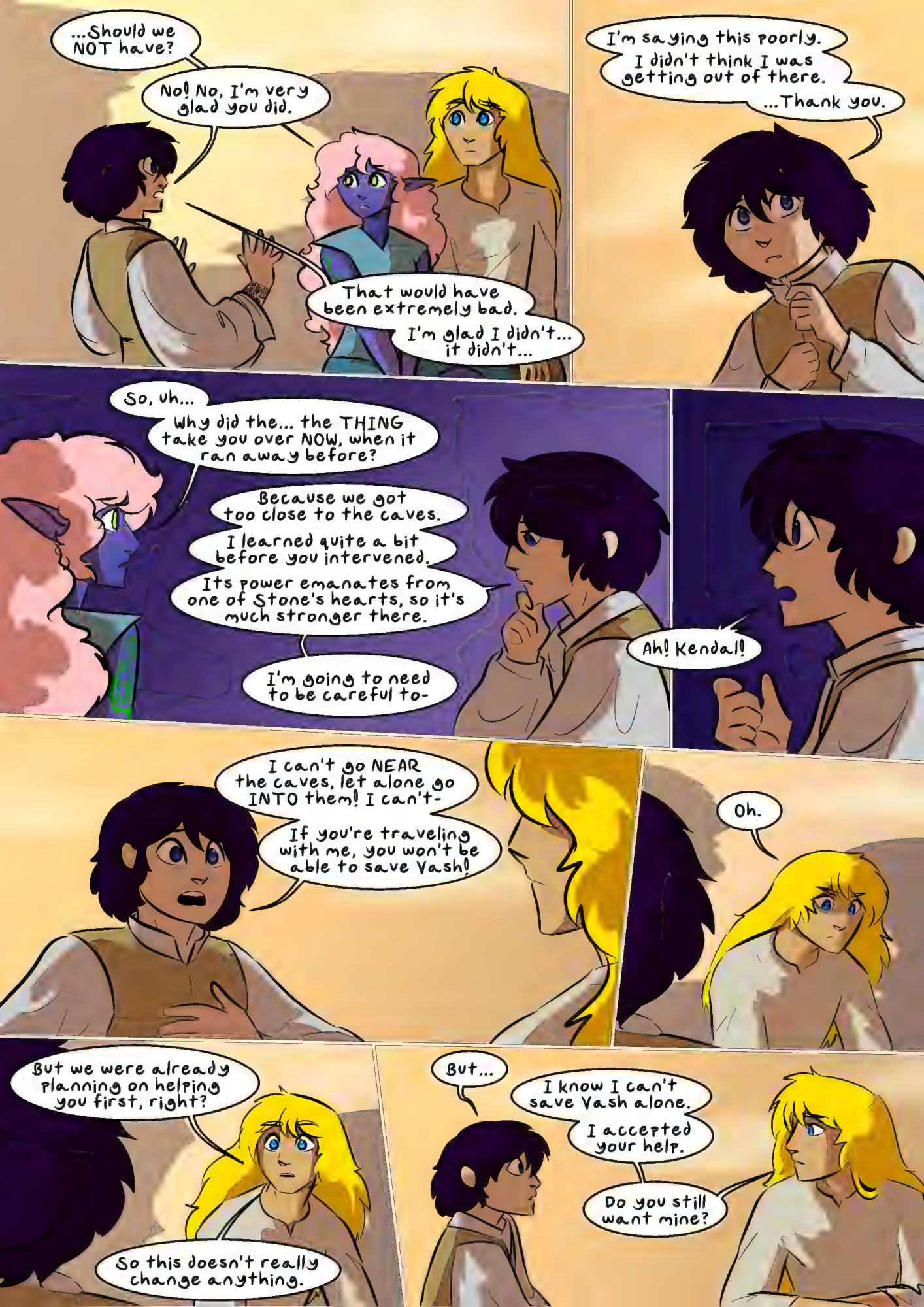
Your plan has one small problem, though.
Oh?
TWITCH
CRACKLE
I don't like it.
What?
What are you doing?!
Making a rookie mistake.
Poorly-channeled lightning magic can easily paralyze.
If I can't move, YOU can't move.
These caves are CRAWLING with dangers!
You're leaving yourself completely vulnerable to the beasts I've been shielding you from!
What a shame. Looks like you won't be getting out anytime soon.
Don't think you can bluff with me. We both know you CAN'T do this.
You're not the self-sacrificing type.
You're selfish!
Arrogant!
TERRIFIED!
And YOU gave me NOTHING TO LOSE!

We're miles underground. I don't know the way back.
The longer I'm down here, the stronger you'll get until I lose myself entirely!
Stop this! Release us!
I'm already DEAD!
No! Don't you see what I've given you?
I am all the power you could ever hope to possess!
With me, you have mastery over ALL the elements of this world!
You are the first true Void Mage!
Wow, you're really getting desperate.
You've made it very obvious that your power's not mine to control.
But someday it COULD be.
You are strong-willed. Intelligent.
Already, you have shown you can overpower me!
Do you truly believe that you cannot learn to CONTROL me?

You're baiting me.
You called me "arrogant" literally thirty seconds ago.
But am I wrong?
No.
But, unfortunately for you, I'm also petty and vindictive.
You shouldn't have invaded my mind.
No.
NO!
SHUNK

Sorry about this!
!!
POOF

Erin?
Are you feeling okay?
AUGH!
Yes! It's me! I'm okay!
It's me.
The dragon's gone.
There was a dragon?
Uh-
You're awake!
And not trying to kill anybody!
I - yeah. I'm in control.
That's great!
Finding you was pretty rough, but the path didn't branch much on the way.
And once the lightshow started, we could zero in pretty fast.
Smart move, paralyzing yourself so we could catch up!
You guys really came after me.


...Should we NOT have?
No! No, I'm very glad you did.
That would have been extremely bad.
I'm glad I didn't... it didn't...
I'm saying this poorly.
I didn't think I was getting out of there.
...Thank you.
So, uh...
Why did the... the THING take you over NOW, when it ran away before?
Because we got too close to the caves.
I learned quite a bit before you intervened.
Its power emanates from one of Stone's hearts, so it's much stronger there.
I'm going to need to be careful to-
Ah! Kendal!
I can't go NEAR the caves, let alone go INTO them! I can't-
If you're traveling with me, you won't be able to save Vash!
Oh.
But we were already planning on helping you first, right?
So this doesn't really change anything.
But...
I know I can't save Vash alone.
I accepted your help.
Do you still want mine?

...No. You just don't understand the danger.
I never should have gotten you involved.
The thing possessing me is the Primordial Void Dragon.
The one the Elemental Primordials died fighting.
It's trapped in the core of the planet, and it wants me to use my uniquely potent magic to let it out.
Apparently it's real, and still alive.
It's also ancient, hungry, and incomprehensibly powerful.
I... I can't even articulate how bad the situation is.
Well, now I DEFINITELY want to know why it recognized me!
So now we know what we're fighting, and what it wants.
That's good.
...Are you serious? This literally could not be worse.
He's right, nothing's changed.
We just know what's going on.
Specifically, now we know you're definitely MUCH too dangerous to leave alone.
Silly me! I'm still so rattled, I forgot neither of you have a sense of self-preservation.
I'll gladly accept your continued assistance!
Yeah, that's one way of putting it.

Poor thing.
HISSSSS
Your cursed hunger has driven you to such depths.
Who were you, I wonder?
Before you were lost in the dark?
They deserved better than this.

GURK
WHUD
Stay here.
A contingent of paladins will arrive shortly to treat your injuries.
Thank you.

Brinn, stay away! It could still be dangerous!
It is quite dead.
The paladins will dispose of it soon.
I like your wings.
Thank you.
My champion.
My lady?
I bring grim news.
The Dark Dragon has chosen an avatar.

Where?
HOW?
The Eternal Storm has vanished.
The trap is sprung, after all these millennia.
But that's an ocean away!
Yes.
I am sending a messenger to the Paladins in the area.
They aren't going to be enough.
I know.
But the avatar is shrouded from my sight. We need their eyes.
We must move quickly.
The avatar's power does not yet rival your own.
Then there's still time?
Our battle has raged since the birth of your species.
There is always time to fight back.